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USSR: Peace in Gulf War Mixed Blessing for Moscow 12

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Special Analysis

USSR:

Peace in Gulf War Mixed Blessing for Moscow

Moscow has welcomed the Iran-Iraq cease-fire but probably views the prospect of peace with mixed feelings. The Soviets are eager for the US to reduce its naval presence in the Persian Gulf but probably are concerned Iran and Iraq will turn primarily to the West to reconstruct their economies. Soviet efforts to court Iran will be limited by economic constraints, uncertainties about Iranian policies, and relations with Iraq and the Gulf states.

Getting US Ships Out

The Soviet Government yesterday offered to withdraw its naval forces from the Gulf if "nonregional" states also withdraw their ships. It also called for an international accord on Gulf security; a Kuwaiti newspaper last week quoted a Soviet official as saying the USSR will soon propose a regional security conference under UN auspices.

Removing the rationale for the US naval presence in the Gulf has been a major Soviet objective. Apart from the potential direct military threat to the USSR, Moscow has been concerned that the US Navy could parlay its escort role into an expansion of its permanent basing privileges in the Gulf. More broadly, the Soviets do not want US forces to be viewed as contributing to settlements of regional conflicts.

Concern About Western Inroads

A reduced US naval presence might, however, improve US-Iranian relations, which Moscow hopes to prevent. Soviet media have highlighted recent statements by US officials on prospects for better relations with Iran, and a Soviet official has told a Japanese newspaper that Washington and Tehran are likely to move closer together in the postwar period.

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Moscow undoubtedly realizes that it is in a poor position to compete with the West in providing the economic aid Iran and Iraq will need for rebuilding. The Soviets probably also believe Iraq will be freer to diversify its sources of arms and less constrained to mute its political differences with Moscow, its main arms supplier. [REDACTED]

Courting Tehran

Concern about a US-Iranian rapprochement is likely to lead the Soviets to court Tehran more aggressively, probably with reminders that Moscow refused to support an arms embargo to enforce UN Resolution 598 and with discussions on economic cooperation.

[REDACTED]

The Soviets probably will not make any military commitments to Iran until they believe the cease-fire is stable. To meet the influence of Western economic aid, the Kremlin is likely in the first months of a cease-fire to allow some increase in Bloc arms sales to improve Soviet-Iranian relations. In the longer run, competition from Western, Chinese, and Latin American arms offers might prompt the Soviets to offer Iran a major system such as the SA-5 surface-to-air missile, which Tehran has requested in the past. Moscow probably will not sell large amounts of modern weapons to Iran, however, until the political situation in Tehran is resolved after Khomeini dies. The Soviets would rather not arm a regime likely to resume trying to spread Islamic fundamentalism, whether by renewing hostilities with Iraq, increasing material aid to Afghan insurgents, or proselytizing Soviet Muslims.

[REDACTED]

To assuage Iraqi anger over any arms sales to Iran and to keep Baghdad—an ally by treaty—from greatly diversifying its weapons supplies, the Soviets almost certainly would provide weapons that allowed Iraq to maintain military advantage over Iran. Moscow may also be flexible on the renegotiation of Iraq's military debt. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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